

FOREWORD

This extraordinary oral history of the African-American experience at MIT has a transcendent value to those interested in American higher education, and indeed the American experience. The volume sets before us the challenges, triumphs, and failures of a great research university as it has grappled with its role in bridging the racial divides that continue to plague our nation.

This book is in many ways an important companion to *The Shape of the River*, the detailed study of the long-term consequences of considering race in American college and university admissions, written by William G. Bowen and Derek Bok. Clarence Williams's volume presents us with individual human experiences that lie beneath statistical studies, such as those undertaken by Bowen and Bok.

The story is told through reflective interviews with African-American graduates of MIT, and with academic and administrative leaders of the university, whose experiences span several decades. Broadly, the story is one of success. Indeed, some of these graduates have become great leaders of our society, including the Secretary General of the United Nations and the president of a major university. Others are young and just establishing their careers. All are contributing their talents in important ways to our nation and world. Each expresses the importance of the rigorous and demanding education they received at MIT.

But the story is not entirely positive. The memories of student days are often bittersweet, reflecting a variety of burdens and unhappy personal experiences that call vividly to our attention the asymmetries of experience of many minorities in our culture—even in our finest institutions. It is also clear that each of these graduates had to draw

on a high degree of inner strength and commitment to excel.

Finally, the story is one of leadership by students and by academic administrators who enabled the MIT student body to become remarkably diverse. But the struggle continues to this day, because the diversity of our faculty—and of most faculties across the nation—still fails to match that of our students. The wonderful successes in personal and professional life of the graduates interviewed for this book provide the strongest possible motivation to continue this quest.

Ever present in this book is the strong but quiet presence of its editor and author, Clarence Williams. I am proud to claim as a colleague and friend this man who has done so much to help both individuals and our institution achieve the successes chronicled here, and to guide us toward meeting our continuing challenges.

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